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Swiss Voters Reject Citizenship Proposals

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GENEVA Dashing the chance for almost 200,000 youngsters to get citizenship easily, voters in this Alpine country rejected two government proposals to loosen tough naturalization rules in a referendum Sunday.

Nearly 57 percent of voters opposed granting automatic citizenship to third-generation children born to immigrant families. In a slightly closer result, nearly 52 percent rejected easing naturalization rules for first- and second-generation residents raised and schooled here.

"This is a sad day for Switzerland," Claudio Micheloni, head of a migrants' integration association, said of voters' third denial of citizenship liberalization in 21 years.

In other questions, voters supported a government-paid national maternity leave system, but rejected a citizen initiative to block the closure of small post offices to save money.

About a fifth of the 7.2 million people living in Switzerland are not citizens, most of them immigrants from Italy and the Balkans or their offspring. It is one of the highest proportions in Europe, partly because Swiss law makes citizenship relatively hard to get.

Immigrants have to wait at least 12 years to apply for naturalization, and their Swiss-born children and even grandchildren do not qualify automatically. Many people also decide not to seek naturalization to avoid complex procedures, which once included visits by inspectors who checked that applicants' apartments conformed to Swiss standards of cleanliness.

If the rules had changed, around 80,000 grandchildren would have received citizenship and some 117,000 other youngsters could have made speedy applications.

"We are angry and disappointed," said Doris Bianchi, spokeswoman of an association of Swiss-born foreigners. "We feel we're part of this country."

Right-wing opponents argued the changes would undermine what it means to be Swiss. They drew widespread criticism over a referendum campaign that featured Osama bin Laden's photo on a Swiss ID card and advertisements claiming Switzerland could be taken over by Muslims.

"We don't want Switzerland to be a doorway for all and sundry," said Maria Angela Guyot, an official of the Swiss People's Party. "The current rules are fine."

Turnout for referendums, which are held several times a year in Switzerland's direct democracy, seldom exceed 50 percent. But the bitter debate stoked by the citizenship question drew 53 percent of the country's 4.7 million voters.

The result underlined the political divide between the country's more liberal French-speaking areas and its conservative German-speaking regions.

Voters in French cantons gave solid backing to the citizenship proposals, joined by German-speaking Basel. But most German areas, from urban giant Zurich to tiny Appenzell rejected them. Italian-speaking Ticino also voted no.

In a separate poll, 55 percent of voters approved a plan for the government to pay for 14 weeks of maternity leave, replacing a system of widely varying benefits set by the country's 26 cantons or individual companies.

The idea failed in several previous referendums, largely because of opposition from conservative groups in German-speaking areas that said government money should not be spent on women who planned to return to work after giving birth. Rural German cantons again voted "no" Sunday, but urban German speakers and French regions tipped the balance.

In the day's closest question, 50.2 percent of voters rejected a proposal to halt post office closures.

The local post office is one of the most cherished emblems of Swiss life, but market forces and the digital revolution have led the government agency to close 668 offices the past three years, many in small communities. Anger over the closures fed a petition campaign that collected the 100,000 signatures needed to force the referendum.
